

Seems like an odd thing to consider; that someone could be addicted to suffering. We all have to endure suffering of one sort or another, but there are some people who are literally addicted to distress. Now wait a minute, who would want such a thing? First of all, is such a thing actually possible?

Originally, this article was written in 2015. This update re-names this article and focuses mainly on the problem of literally being addicted to oneself or one's own suffering. Of course, all human beings seek happiness and pleasure and do whatever we can to avoid suffering. So, why would someone allow themselves to become addicted to suffering?

Have you ever known a person who, although being provided with good advice or who are provided with specific steps to improve their lives, continue to complain; sort of wallowing in their suffering? This leaves others to wonder whether or not such a person actually finds some benefit to this kind of addiction.

Although people enjoy being happy, it never seems to last long, and they return to a kind of 'panic' mode or appear to be in a constant state of worry. Is there a kind of comfortable familiarity to be found in suffering? Whenever given the opportunity to see their suffering for what it is, and are subsequently given a way out, some people inevitably seem to revert to feeling miserable; complaining about the level of their particular suffering, almost as though they were the only ones that must deal with life's problems.

Somehow, they believe that their particular problems are different than other people's problems. For some reason their problems are special and particular to themselves alone. Although being given a glimpse of joy, they revert back to the things that do not work. Why is this?

Well, being in a position of teaching the Dhamma to others, it is an inescapable surety that there will be someone in the group who fits this description. Discussion about suffering can, of course, not be avoided when teaching the Dhamma. The focus of much of the Buddha's teachings is dissatisfaction and suffering [dukkha].



There are many reasons that a person becomes addicted to unhappiness. First, it appears as a dichotomy; while on the one hand they seem sincere about seeking happiness; intentionally pursuing things that are designed to eradicate their suffering, they revert back to wallowing in their unfortunate state of mind.

Stubbornly, they also do not want to be blamed for this state of being. In other words that they are unhappy is not directly their own fault. With this mindset, they are able to, in essence, play the role of the victim, which they believe provides certain benefits, such as the attention of others. On the surface this behavior may appear to warrant the attention of others, but people who are deeply addicted to this form of living are very adept at indirectly manipulating others for help. Since the assistance or help is never taken seriously, what is left is to recognize that the individual seeking help is merely enjoying the attention.

That this may be the case becomes evident, when in a discussion about life's problems, there is almost an air of competition, comparing whose life or historical circumstances were the worst. The person who is addicted to suffering will almost always have experienced the worst of whatever problem is being discussed.

People who have subjected themselves to this sort of addiction find their way into all sorts of self-help groups; the Buddhist sangha among them. However, recognizing when a person never seems to understand the Dhamma, with respect to their own situation, then teachers and lay persons

need to employ more patience, but also more metta (compassion).

While there are examples of persons in the suttas that did not benefit from the Dhamma, like the Buddha, we must extend our loving kindness in such a way, so as to provide the clearest teaching possible, and this for the purpose of helping such a person to see (identify), and understand (comprehend), how and why they are the cause of their own suffering.

Of course, all humans are the cause of their own suffering. This fact is indisputable. However, in order to understand and appreciate how and why we are the cause of our own suffering, is another matter completely, but this is the only goal of the Four Noble Truths. For when we are able to identify how and why we create our own suffering, will we be able to follow the path of the Four Noble Truths in its entirety.

Third Noble Truth: Cessation of Suffering

When teaching the Four Noble Truths, I find that there is always one or two persons who seem to become stuck at the Third Noble Truth: the truth about the cessation of suffering.

People that are addicted to emotions, understand perfectly well, the First, Second, and Third Noble Truths. They are expert at acknowledging the suffering; expert at defining the causes of their suffering, but when it comes to the cessation of suffering, this is another story altogether. It seems as though they hit a wall.

Addiction to Emotions

Whether you notice this within yourself or someone else; if there is a pattern of suffering and struggle from one issue to another with only a brief time in between problems, then it is likely that you are addicted to emotions. If it seems as though your life is constantly peppered with anxiety, mental anguish like worry, fear, low energy caused by low self-esteem, bouts of depression, fear and particularly victimhood, it is a

fair assumption the reason for this is that you are in constant need of an “emotion” fix.

Emotions are Chemistry¹



The human brain reacts with split-second timing in response to our thoughts. Chemicals known as neurotransmitters, peptides and hormones, are routinely pumped into the bloodstream whenever we have an emotional thought.

Whenever a particular emotion is repeated frequently, whether the emotion is one of pleasure or displeasure, happiness or sadness, over a substantial period of time, the body becomes accustomed to the chemicals that are associated with the prolonged emotion.

This is exactly the reason why people become addicted to certain sense-pleasures such as, sugar, nicotine, THC, alcohol, and yes, even negative emotions. Negative emotions produce certain stress-related hormones that the body can literally crave.

Fitness addiction is another type of emotional addiction. Sounds strange? It's not. When a person regularly engages in strenuous exercise, like running, the body produces lots of endogenous opioids², which causes a pleasant sensation when they flood the bloodstream.

Certain organs in the body, such as the hypothalamus, produce chemicals that cause the body to experience happiness, joy, contentment, love, fun, even feelings of fulfillment. These chemicals, such as Dopamine, Endocannabinoids,

¹ Emotion Chemistry: <https://www.amrita.edu/news/hormones-and-chemicals-linked-our-emotion>

² Endogenous opioids: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/6091217/>

Oxytocin, and Endorphins, are enormously powerful.

One of the most powerful chemicals the human body manufactures is called dopamine. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter, released by the hypothalamus and is directly involved with our ability to focus, attention, memory, drive, muscle control and so on. Dopamine is associated with alertness, memory, cognition, happiness and vigilance. Low levels of dopamine in the body can result in depression, impulsivity, mood swings, attention deficit, cognitive issues, compulsive behavior, **cravings**, apathy and loss of satisfaction in life activities. It inhibits rational thinking, the absence of which is called schizophrenia.

Dopamine is extremely important in the brain's reward system, and elevations in its level can lead to addictive behaviors, suspicious personality, and paranoia, such as happens when a person overdoses on drugs that cause overproduction of dopamine.

While there are no food sources that can provide dopamine directly to the human body, a person suffering from low dopamine levels; depression, anxiety, worry, should consider regularly eating foods rich in tyrosine and phenylalanine: the amino acids required to manufacture dopamine. Both of these amino acids are available in protein rich foods like turkey, chicken, milk, cheese and eggs.³

Overstimulation of emotions can cause chemicals such as dopamine and cortical steroids to be released into the bloodstream. Under stimulation of dopamine, for example, is the cause of why many people overeat; which is why exercise is so very important when attempting to control one's craving for that food high.

Overeating or eating the wrong things is caused by a chemical hormone known as corticotropin⁴. This is the exact same peptide hormone that makes recovering from drug addiction so difficult.

Regardless of whatever addictions to body chemicals that we might have, every chemical released affecting emotions comes from the brain. Therefore, starting with the brain by controlling our thinking would be a good place to start. There is no wonder that the Buddha began his first teaching with the Four Noble Truths, which are aimed at controlling one's thinking.

You Are What You Focus On...Maybe

Dr. David Sack, M.D.⁵ has studied this and other sources of addiction. He has compiled a list of things causing addiction to unhappiness. We will consider each possible cause for this kind of addiction, identifying the source.

Possible Cause No. 1: Deep-rooted insecurity or lack of self-esteem may cause some people to feel undeserving of happiness.

Application of the First Noble Truth: Acknowledging Your Suffering: Insecurity and lack of self-esteem are only the effects of the root cause. You acknowledge that you suffer from self-esteem issues and insecurity.

Application of the Second Noble Truth: The Root Cause of Your Suffering: The root cause, or real focus in identifying the source of the suffering, is the **idea or belief** that you are not worthy of experiencing happiness; you believe you don't deserve to be happy.

³ Emotion Chemicals: <https://www.amrita.edu/news/hormones-and-chemicals-linked-our-emotion>

⁴ Corticotropin: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corticotropin-releasing_hormone

⁵ David Sack,M.D. - David Sack, M.D., is board certified in Psychiatry, Addiction Psychiatry and Addiction Medicine. Dr. Sack currently serves as CMO of Elements Behavioral Health, a network of addiction treatment centers that include Promises Treatment Centers, The Ranch, and The Right Step. After receiving his medical degree from Rush Medical College, he completed his residency in Psychiatry at the UCLA-Neuropsychiatric Institute. He served as a senior clinical scientist at the National Institute of Mental Health where his research interests included affective disorders, seasonal and circadian rhythms, and neuroendocrinology.

Application of the Third Noble Truth:

Cessation of Suffering: Here, you accept the fact that there is something that you can do about the cause of your feelings of low self-esteem and insecurity. The caveat here is that you must believe that this is possible and that the teachings of the Buddha are true. However, the only way you can discover this is through your own personal experience. No one can, nor is able, to convince you either of the truth of the Buddha's teaching or that cessation of your suffering is even possible. You must discover this on your own. No one, no other person, no doctor, monk or nun, can cause you to believe these things are true by mere word or testimony.

Possible Cause No. 2: People who grew up with a parenting style characterized by excessive discipline and unrealistic expectations may have learned to equate unhappiness with love and success.

Application of the First Noble Truth:

Acknowledging Your Suffering: Equating unhappiness with love and success, are the symptoms of the root cause. Acknowledging that in fact you DO equate love and success with unhappiness is the first step. The first three Noble Truths are all about inquiry; investigation, and opening up your thinking to possibilities. Acknowledgment that your parents' methods of child rearing is the root cause of your suffering may be correct, and is certainly worth exploring.

Application of the Second Noble Truth: The Root Cause of Your Suffering:

Root Cause of Your Suffering: However, the root cause may appear to be one's parent's excessive discipline or unrealistic expectations, but the fact is, this has merely caused you to equate unhappiness with love and success. Roots support the tree, and directly affect the health and appearance of the tree. If a tree or plant is stunted in some way, the cause can be found in the roots. Digging up the roots allows you to identify the cause of **why** the tree is stunted.

Application of the Third Noble Truth:

Cessation of Suffering: Abandoning or doing away with one's parents will certainly not cease the results produced by the cause. Now that you have acknowledged the thing that you suffer from, (this one thing), and have accepted the root cause of

the suffering, you can now investigate the cessation of the suffering. Your focus now switches away from the cause of the suffering, and is redirected onto the object of suffering itself; namely your habitual thinking of equating unhappiness with love and success.

Do you understand how the first three of the Four Noble Truths work? Now, try using these first three Noble Truths with each of the following circumstances. Practice at identifying and acknowledging the First Noble Truth, the Second and the Third. Soon, you will find that doing this exercise will help you with your own addiction to unhappiness.

- Lifelong struggles with trauma or other negative experiences may fuel an unconscious desire to continually return to the status quo of unhappiness.
- Some people who seem comfortable in their misery actually may be suffering from an underlying mental health disorder.
- Some people pride themselves on realism, believing that being practical or realistic also means focusing on the negative.
- Because of decisions or experiences in their past, some people are consumed by guilt or regret that they cannot overcome. Instead, they choose to punish themselves and/or others.
- Some people are afraid to feel joy since positive feelings might be a “setup” for disappointment.
- The prospect of happiness strikes fear of the unknown for those who have never felt anything but unhappiness.
- Dissatisfaction becomes a motivator to work harder, change jobs, eat healthier, spend more time with friends and family, or prevent unwanted behaviors or situations.

- Some people make it a personal mission to take on the world's problems as their own. While noble in some respects, these individuals cannot allow themselves to feel happiness when, for example, people are starving or global warming is damaging the planet.

In order to discover any cause for one's dukkha (stress & dissatisfaction), one must be aware of the suffering that they are causing themselves. To do this, the sufferer must be willing to at least look at, and consider, the causes. However, in order to see how their behavior instigates and keeps their suffering going, the sufferer must be willing to identify a solution, and then be willing to embark on a path in order to successfully eradicate the thing which is the root cause of the suffering.

If you feel that one of Dr. Sacks' causes seems to fit a description for the cause of your stress, then the next step is not to confide in another, rather to sincerely examine the things that cause you to live as you do, with negativity, hopelessness, perhaps feeling broken all the time. For some people, this broken feeling is a never-ending cycle of disappointments in yourself, because it seems that you are always trying to play catch-up with those around you who do not suffer as you do. Perhaps you wonder what it is that makes you unable or incapable of resolving your problems.

When Unhappiness is all You Know

Addiction to stress, distress, unhappiness and worry, can affect a person's entire life. Perhaps you have spent a good part of your life, perhaps most of your childhood, being accustomed to feeling broken or unhappy. You may be under the delusion that this thinking is okay, and the excuse to keep thinking this way is that you don't know anything else or any other way to be. Well then, isn't it about time to explore other possibilities, if one exists that will change your way of thinking and possibly even eradicate your suffering? When would now be the right time?

Many people seek counseling help; psychologists or psychiatrists, in order to understand their own self-imposed suffering. While this may certainly be recommended for persons who are affected to the degree of mental or emotional incapacity, there is however, another solution.

The entire life of the Buddha was marked by his teaching of suffering. His solution to gain the ability to understand suffering and the eradication of suffering is the process known as the Four Noble Truths. However, the Four Noble Truths can only offer an individual a guarantee of success if, and only if, one follows the path; the remedy; laid out by the Buddha.

Meditation

Of all of the methods for understanding one's suffering, meditation is at the top of the list. For without the ability to meditate correctly, one would find it difficult to focus on identifying the elements of their suffering, which is probably the most integral step.

Meditation can, of course, be used for many things. There are many different forms of meditation besides samatha (tranquility meditation), and vipassana (insight meditation).

The purpose of meditation, particularly samatha meditation is specifically to gain truth and wipe away one's own delusions. Also, samatha meditation must go beyond mere intellectual understanding of the truth about one's own suffering. So, initially, the purpose of samatha meditation is to put an end to one's ignorance about one's own suffering, and to clarify our own cravings.

Many people report observable changes in themselves after meditation. However, if the result of your meditation never seems to produce this clarity, and one's attitudes toward their cravings, then it is clear that something is not working. That something can usually be found in one's intentions for meditating. One must understand that the approach to meditation must be purposeful, not merely to relax. The only method that the Buddha was able to cause his own self-awakening was through meditation.

It is therefore, not enough to have visions of color, light or anything else during the meditation session. For one who actually understands the purpose of meditation, these things are of no significance. Giving an inordinate amount of attention to the things one experiences during meditation can be downright dangerous from a psychopathological standpoint.

In the Theravada Forest tradition, there is a method of meditation known as kammathana. The most important part of this method is to keep awareness of one's breath. In this way, thoughts are redirected onto an object, the object being the in and out breath.

The word kammathana means, in literal translation, a basis of work or a place of work, which focuses on the contemplation of particular meditation themes for the purpose of bringing a meditator's awareness to the forces of defilement (kilesa), craving (tanha), and ignorance (avijja) that may become uprooted from brain thinking.

Different devices are used in various Buddhist traditions. Overall, it is permissible to use certain mental devices as points of focus to sharpen one's attention. These devices are also dependent on the meditator's choice. Such focal points can be almost anything, meaning anything that will redirect the meditator's brain thinking and focus on an object.

Mental devices that have been commonly used are things such as concentrating on a spot on the floor, a hole in a wall, some metal object, the earth, color or the Buddha himself. These methods, though not all, can be found within the Pali texts known as the Visuddhi-magga. The Buddha gave objects of meditation according to the meditator's characteristics. This is important to note, because it is very beneficial that a meditator choose an object, particularly a mental object, that is specific to their own circumstances.

If the meditator is suffering from an addiction to a particular emotion or repetitive behavior due to being addicted to unhappiness, then the choice of a meditation object that coincides with this would be most beneficial. However, a word of

caution, the object of meditation that is chosen should be within the comprehension of the meditator. For example, choosing a mental object, such as String Theory in Quantum Physics, might be a bit complex for the average meditator. For one who experiences an addiction to unhappiness, stress or emotional unrest, perhaps the mental object of focus might be to choose the emotions that are most recursive.

The idea is to identify the cause of the unhappiness, and to counteract the strong tendencies one has. For example, if one is attracted to indulging in the effects of unhappiness and suffering, then it would be recommended to meditate on a time when happiness was experienced.

Likewise, if one is, say, attracted to sensual desires, such as the taste of delicious food, it might be recommended to meditate on a body that is overweight, ugly and obese. The purpose of which is to create a kind of offset or counterbalance mental awareness of repulsion. The goal of which is to eventually reach a mental state where neither attraction nor repulsion exists. This is what is known as skillful means in Buddhist parlance; neither a liking or disliking.

Four Important Factors of Meditation

For beginners, Samatha Bhavana or the development of mental tranquility with concentration, the easiest starting point is the breath.

The goal in samatha meditation is to cause the brains thinking to become still, and clear. Picture a serene pond, where the water is still and unmoving, as though it were made of smooth glass. The water is completely free from disturbances of any kind. This still water reflects all things as they actually are, and distorts nothing, but mirrors everything just as it actually is.

This is how we must approach the awareness of tranquility (samatha) meditation. In order to reach this state of meditation, one must first be willing to work toward focusing on the breath.

While this may not seem very exciting, mystifying or fun, it is the basis for all meditation, and is the only path toward more insightful meditation, known as vipassana.

There are four distinct paths to one's successfully achieving samatha (tranquility). These four describe the mental state of alertness needed to achieve this, which are:

Chanda (desire):

This is a skillful desire, a skillful means of focusing on the breath. The meditator must develop a sort of welcoming, approachable interest in their breath for the purpose of keeping track of the breath's movement, into the body and out of the body.

Viriya (persistence):

If first you don't succeed, try, try again or as Buddhist bhikkhuni, Pema Chodron says, "fail, fail again, fail better." Allow yourself to be meticulous with regard to everything related to the breath. You are in-charge of the breath.

Citta (attention):

Focus your attention onto the breath and nothing else. If your attention strays from your focus on the breath, calmly notice this, and re-focus. Being observant on something that is so omnipresent such as one's breath seems a bit boring. So, you must be diligent and keep trying to focus your attention on the breath. The breath doesn't simply interact with the nose. The action of breathing involves the lungs, the rib cage, the heart, the stomach, and all parts of the upper, middle and lower parts of the body. Literally, the oxygen permeates every part of the body, until it quite literally oozes out of every pore. So, there's not nothing to focus on.

Vimansa (discrimination/discernment):

Keeping focused on the in and out breath means developing discernment, discriminating between the sensations of the in breath and the out breath. Does your breathing feel natural or is it forced? Are you overcompensating by extending

the rib cage to take deeper breaths than you normally would? Your breathing must feel natural; must be natural. Discernment of the in breath focuses on the feeling of coolness of the air entering your nostrils, and the heat of the out breath coming out of the mouth.

Again, while these four steps seem to be mundane, that is actually the point. Focusing on something so mundane as the in breath and the out breath is part of the reason for these four factors of meditation. The other reason, of course, is to re-train the brain to focus when you want it to focus. When the brain is taught to be tranquil, the mind becomes active. In other words, while the brain is calm, one's pure consciousness has an opportunity to be seen and understood.

Using this method to steer the brain's thinking and chattering away from unhappiness, distress, worry, and so on, is the first step toward recognizing your addiction to certain emotional states.

This will, of course, seem foreign to you at first. Your brain and emotions are not accustomed to being calm. You will likely experience the tugging desire to create some unhappy or worrisome event in order to experience what you believe is normal. On the other hand, if your addiction is focused on your unhappy circumstances in life or the sorrowful outlook you have developed about your own life and person, you may feel the tugging desire to revert to a hopeless, sad, sorrowful way of feeling.

Remember, it is recurrent and repeated meditation, focused on one's breath, that will retrain the brain. It is a commonly held fact that when brain neurons are no longer associated with certain behaviors and thoughts, the neural connection ceases to exist. Neural connections will literally die, rebuilding a new neural connection with whatever replaces the old one.

Perhaps this could be an object that one might use to focus on; the neural connection of unhappiness becoming disconnected and remade with happiness, contentment or merely the joy of shedding one's ignorance and replacing that ignorance with understanding.

Remember, the entire point of meditation is to remove the ignorance we maintain about our own selves; our delusional opinions; the actions we do that are not beneficial to us, which in turn all creates our suffering.

While seeking the counsel or opinion of a monk or nun; perhaps even a skilled householder, can be beneficial, there is no council, opinion or teaching that will be beneficial unless you are prepared to face the truth about the nature of your own thinking.

Regardless of the quality of level of another's advice, teaching, counsel or the position of the person giving such, without the skill of meditation you will not be able to correctly contemplate the root cause of your suffering, and therefore, will not be able to identify or understand the operation such root-causes effects your thinking, and your actions.

Quieting the brains chatter is the key that opens the door to seeing the truth about ones' own delusional beliefs, opinions and thinking. In order to be able to identify the things that cause an addiction to unhappiness and suffering, you must be able, intentionally, to agree to investigate these things. When you have agreed to sincerely and honestly investigate these things, then it will be easier to follow through with the process of applying mediation and the Four Noble Truths. In this way, you will certainly discover the truth about the nature of happiness.

Further Reading:

Are You Addicted to Suffering and Struggle?
https://www.huffpost.com/entry/are-you-addicted-to-suffe_b_9744416

Six Traits of People Addicted to Negativity
<https://exploringyourmind.com/6-trait-people-addicted-negativity/>

10 Warning Signs You're Addicted to Suffering
<https://possibilitychange.com/addicted-to-suffering/>